

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Winter brings folks, wildlife together – for better or worse

By Kelly Bahr

As winter deepens, some wild animals will move closer to our homes to forage under bird feeders, scavenge in compost piles, or take shelter under buildings.

For some people this is a source of delight; for others a cause of apprehension. Skunks, raccoons, woodrats, squirrels, mice and bats: homeowners contact Wildcare daily concerned about the presence of these animals in the neighborhood or house. Misinformation about local wildlife is often promoted through social media, or sometimes well-meaning neighbors. Long-standing myths are taken as fact, and wild animals become victims of our lack of knowledge.

When confronted with a raccoon, skunk or squirrel in the yard, under the porch or in the attic, often the first reaction is to get the animal out by any means. Millions of wild animals are killed with traps and poisons every year in ineffective attempts to remove them from private property.

But since the root cause of the problem hasn't been addressed, people find that another animal soon fills the vacancy. Remedying a situation is often as simple as removing a food source. In reality, wildlife conflicts can usually be resolved non-lethally with a little knowledge and patience.

Wildlife needs food, water, shelter and space to survive. Pet food left outside, open trash cans, fruit trees and gardens are the most obvious food attractants, but bird feeders are an often-overlooked feeding opportunity and source of wildlife encounters. Sunflower seeds, bird seed, or peanuts inevitably spill from the feeder, attracting small mammals such as mice, squirrels and skunks.

Now aware of the abundant food at the "bird seed buffet," they'll return for more. The comings and goings of rodents and birds is then observed by skunks, raccoons, coyotes, snakes and feral and domestic cats. For these skilled predators, the feeder becomes a constant and easy supply of prey. For Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks, the area around the feeder, teeming with birds, is prime hunting ground.

While many of us enjoy feeding birds, be aware that by providing a food source for songbirds, you've created an



Bird feeders become food dispensers for a variety of wildlife, including raccoons. Daily cleaning around the bird feeder area could be a solution to keep unwanted visitors away.

Photos courtesy of Wildcare Eastern Sierra

attractive ecosystem for all wildlife in your area. If shelter, water (ponds and canals) and a safe travel route is nearby, it is certain that wild mammals will appear, and will keep returning.

Skunks and raccoons may take up residence under an adjacent porch or shed for shelter in winter or to have babies in spring. Squirrels and other rodents may create burrows near the feeder for easy and safe access to food. Without an understanding of the source of the problem, people will often initiate a cycle of feeding songbirds while trapping and relocating, poisoning or otherwise killing the "nuisance" animal. But relocating or killing the animal won't solve the problem when the habitat has everything the species needs.

If you have birdfeeders and want to avoid attracting other wildlife, consider the following tips. Clean up spilled seed under the feeder daily. Keep seed off the ground by using seed catching trays under the feeder. Bring feeders in at night. Buy a no-waste seed mix.

As more habitat is destroyed or altered through development, wildfires and drought, wild animals are often forced into our backyards in search of food, water and shelter. While we may see these animals as "pests," we can also



Contrary to myths, skunks use their spraying ability as a last resort and give plenty of warnings so that humans can avoid that unpleasant situation.

remember that many species are beneficial to our communities. For example, the much-maligned striped skunk eats large quantities of insects, mice and voles.

A common myth is that if you cross paths with a skunk, you are likely to get sprayed. In fact, skunks prefer to spray only as a last resort, and will provide plenty of warning first. The skunk will repeatedly

lift his tail and shake it, then stomp his front feet vigorously. If you continue to approach despite repeated warnings, then you may get sprayed. At Wildcare we love the docile and intelligent skunk.

It is important we as humans learn to live in peace with wildlife. We have moved into their habitat, and our lives and livelihoods are supported by diverse wildlife and healthy ecosystems. The

current situation for wild animals is dire; countless species are facing extinction. While many of us don't want wildlife living in or under our houses, perhaps we can practice some tolerance and remember that they are simply trying to survive. There are ways to exclude or discourage wild animals from your property that are humane and non-lethal.

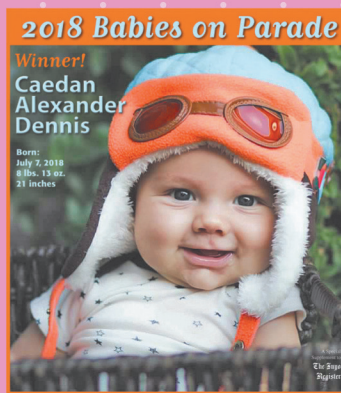
Please call us at

Wildcare if you need help. Peace on Earth, goodwill toward all beings.

(Living with Wildlife is a program of Wildcare Eastern Sierra (formerly Eastern Sierra Wildlife Care) dedicated to helping the people of the Eastern Sierra live in harmony with our wild neighbors. For further information, contact Wildcare Eastern Sierra at (760) 872-1487.)

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Note: Entries are for babies born in the year 2019 Only. Deadline is Friday, January 10, 2020

2019 Babies On Parade CONTEST ENTRY FORM

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